

Ecology – A New Opium for the Masses

In this essay Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek discusses the ‘naturalization’ of capitalism and how ecology became a new field of capitalist investment. He also argues that the ultimate consequence of recent developments in biogenetics will be the ‘end of nature’ – anyone cares to introduce the good man into next nature thinking? According to Žižek ecological apartheid will divide our urban society. Capitalism is not in control of nature and due to techno-scientific interventions the essence of the ecological order will be lost.

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Marco Cicala, a Leftist Italian journalist, told me about his recent weird experience: when, in an article, he once used the word “capitalism,” the editor asked him if the use of this term is really necessary - could he not replace it by a synonymous one, like “economy”? What better proof of the total triumph of capitalism than the virtual disappearance of the very term in the last 2 or 3 decades? No one, with the exception of a few allegedly archaic Marxists, refers to capitalism any longer. The term was simply struck from the vocabulary of politicians, trade unionists, writers and journalists - even of social scientists... But what about the upsurge of the anti-globalization movement in the last years? Does it not clearly contradict this diagnostic? No: a close look quickly shows how this movement also succumbs to “the temptation to transform a critique of capitalism itself (centered on economic mechanisms, forms of work organization, and profit extraction) into a critique of ‘imperialism’.” In this way, when one talks about “globalization and its agents,” the enemy is externalized (usually in the form of vulgar anti-Americanism). From this perspective, where the main task today is to fight “the American empire,” any ally is good if it is anti-American, and so the unbridled Chinese “Communist” capitalism, violent Islamic anti-modernists, as well as the obscene Lukashenko regime in Belarus may appear as progressive anti-globalist comrades-in-arms... What we have here is thus another version of the ill-famed notion of “alternate modernity”: instead of the critique of capitalism as such, of confronting its basic mechanism, we get the critique of the imperialist “excess,” with the (silent) notion of mobilizing capitalist mechanisms within another, more “progressive,” frame.

So what is the problem here? It is easy to make fun of Fukuyama’s notion of the End of History, but the majority today is “Fukuyamaian”: liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally-found formula of the best possible society, all one can do is to render it more just, tolerant, etc. The only true question today is: **do we endorse this “naturalization” of capitalism**, or does today’s global capitalism contain

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strong enough antagonisms which will prevent its indefinite reproduction? There are three (or, rather, four) such antagonisms:

1. Ecology:

In spite of the infinite adaptability of capitalism which, in the case of an acute ecological catastrophe or crisis, can easily turn ecology into a new field of capitalist investment and competition, the very nature of the risk involved fundamentally precludes a market solution - why? Capitalism only works in precise social conditions: it implies the trust into the objectivized/"reified" mechanism of the market's "invisible hand" which, as a kind of Cunning of Reason, guarantees that the competition of individual egotisms works for the common good. However, we are in the midst of a radical change. Till now, historical Substance played its role as the medium and foundation of all subjective interventions: whatever social and political subjects did, it was mediated and ultimately dominated, overdetermined, by the historical Substance. What looms on the horizon today is the unheard-of possibility that a subjective intervention will intervene directly into the historical Substance, catastrophically disturbing its run by way of triggering an ecological catastrophe, a fateful biogenetic mutation, a nuclear or similar military-social catastrophe, etc. No longer can we rely on the safeguarding role of the limited scope of our acts: it no longer holds that, whatever we do, history will go on. For the first time in human history, the act of a single socio-political agent effectively can alter and even interrupt the global historical process, so that, ironically, it is only today that we can say that the historical process should effectively be conceived "not only as Substance, but also as Subject." This is why, when confronted with singular catastrophic prospects (say, a political group which intends to attack its enemy with nuclear or biological weapons), we no longer can rely on the standard logic of the "Cunning of Reason" which, precisely, presupposes the primacy of the historical Substance over acting subjects: we no longer can adopt the stance of "let the enemy who threatens us deploy its potentials and thereby self-destruct himself" - the price for letting the historical Reason do its work is too high since, in the meantime, we may all perish together with the enemy. Recall a frightening detail from the Cuban missile crisis: only later did we learn how close to nuclear war we were during a naval skirmish between an American destroyer and a Soviet B-59 submarine off Cuba on October 27 1962. The destroyer dropped depth charges near the submarine to try to force it to surface, not knowing it had a nuclear-tipped torpedo. Vadim Orlov, a member of the submarine crew, told the conference in Havana that the submarine was authorized to fire it if three officers agreed. The

officers began a fierce, shouting debate over whether to sink the ship. Two of them said yes and the other said no. “A guy named Arkhipov saved the world,” was a bitter comment of a historian on this accident.

2. Private Property:

The inappropriateness of private property for the so-called “intellectual property.” The key antagonism of the so-called new (digital) industries is thus: how to maintain the form of (private) property, within which only the logic of profit can be maintained (see also the Napster problem, the free circulation of music)? And do the legal complications in biogenetics not point in the same direction? Phenomena are emerging here which bring the notion of property to weird paradoxes: in India, local communities can suddenly discover that medical practices and materials they are using for centuries are now owned by American companies, so they should be bought from them; with the biogenetic companies patentizing genes, we are all discovering that parts of ourselves, our genetic components, are already copyrighted, owned by others...

The crucial date in the history of cyberspace is February 3 1976, the day when Bill Gates published his (in)famous “Open Letter to Hobbyists,” the assertion of private property in the software domain: “As the majority of hobbyists must be aware, most of you steal your software. /.../ Most directly, the thing you do is theft.” Bill Gates has built his entire empire and reputation on his extreme views about knowledge being treated as if it were tangible property. This was a decisive signal which triggered the battle for the “enclosure” of the common domain of software.

3. New Techno-Scientific Developments:

The socio-ethical implications of new techno-scientific developments (especially in bio-genetics) - Fukuyama himself was compelled to admit that the biogenetic interventions into human nature are the most serious threat to his vision of the End of History.

With the latest biogenetic developments, we are entering a new phase in which it is simply nature itself which melts into air: the main consequence of the scientific breakthroughs in biogenetics is the end of nature. Once we know the rules of its construction, natural organisms are transformed into objects amenable to manipulation. Nature, human and inhuman, is thus “desubstantialized,” deprived of its

impenetrable density, of what Heidegger called “earth.” This compels us to give a new twist to Freud’s title *Unbehagen in der Kultur* - discontent, uneasiness, in culture. With the latest developments, the discontent shifts from culture to nature itself: nature is no longer “natural,” the reliable “dense” background of our lives; it now appears as a fragile mechanism which, at any point, can explode in a catastrophic direction.

4. New Forms of Apartheid:

Last but not least, new forms of apartheid, new Walls and slums. On September 11th, 2001, the Twin Towers were hit; twelve years earlier, on November 9th, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. November 9th announced the “happy ’90s,” the Francis Fukuyama dream of the “end of history,” the belief that liberal democracy had, in principle, won, that the search is over, that the advent of a global, liberal world community lurks just around the corner, that the obstacles to this ultra-Hollywood happy ending are merely empirical and contingent (local pockets of resistance where the leaders did not yet grasp that their time is over). In contrast to it, 9/11 is the main symbol of the forthcoming era in which new walls are emerging everywhere, between Israel and the West Bank, around the European Union, on the U.S.-Mexico border.

So what if the new proletarian position is that of the inhabitants of slums in the new megalopolises? The explosive growth of slums in the last decades, especially in the Third World megalopolises from Mexico City and other Latin American capitals through Africa (Lagos, Chad) to India, China, Philippines and Indonesia, is perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our times. It is effectively surprising how many features of slum dwellers fit the good old Marxist determination of the proletarian revolutionary subject: they are “free” in the double meaning of the word even more than the classic proletariat (“freed” from all substantial ties; dwelling in a free space, outside the police regulations of the state); they are a large collective, forcibly thrown together, “thrown” into a situation where they have to invent some mode of being-together, and simultaneously deprived of any support in traditional ways of life, in inherited religious or ethnic life-forms.

While today’s society is often characterized as the society of total control, slums are the territories within a state boundaries from which the state (partially, at least) withdrew its control, territories which function as white spots, blanks, in the official map of a state territory. Although they are de facto included into a state by the links of black economy, organized crime, religious groups, etc., the state control is

nonetheless suspended there, they are domains outside the rule of law. In the map of Berlin from the times of the now defunct GDR, the area of West Berlin was left blank, a weird hole in the detailed structure of the big city; when Christa Wolf, the well-known East German half-dissident writer, took her small daughter to the East Berlin's high TV tower, from which one had a nice view over the prohibited West Berlin, the small girl shouted gladly: "Look, mother, it is not white over there, there are houses with people like here!" - as if discovering a prohibited slum Zone...

This is why the "de-structured" masses, poor and deprived of everything, situated in a non-proletarianized urban environment, constitute one of the principal horizons of the politics to come. If the principal task of the emancipatory politics of the XIXth century was to break the monopoly of the bourgeois liberals by way of politicizing the working class, and if the task of the XXth century was to politically awaken the immense rural population of Asia and Africa, the principal task of the XXIth century is to politicize - organize and discipline - the "de-structured masses" of slum-dwellers. Hugo Chavez's biggest achievement is the politicization (inclusion into the political life, social mobilization) of slum dwellers; in other countries, they mostly persist in apolitical inertia. It was this political mobilization of the slum dwellers which saved him against the US-sponsored coup: to the surprise of everyone, Chavez included, slum dwellers massively descended to the affluent city center, tipping the balance of power to his advantage.

How do these four antagonisms relate to each other? There is a qualitative difference between the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included and the other three antagonisms, which designate three domains of what Hardt and Negri call "commons," the shared substance of our social being whose privatization is a violent act which should also be resisted with violent means, if necessary: the commons of culture, the immediately socialized forms of "cognitive" capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education (if Bill Gates were to be allowed monopoly, we would have reached the absurd situation in which a private individual would have literally owned the software texture of our basic network of communication), but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, post, etc.; the commons of external nature threatened by pollution and exploitation (from oil to forests and natural habitat itself); the commons of internal nature (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity). What all these struggles share is the awareness of the destructive potentials, up to the self-annihilation of humanity itself, if the

capitalist logic of enclosing these commons is allowed a free run. It is this reference to “commons” which justifies the resuscitation of the notion of Communism - or, to quote Alain Badiou:

The communist hypothesis remains the good one, I do not see any other. If we have to abandon this hypothesis, then it is no longer worth doing anything at all in the field of collective action. Without the horizon of communism, without this Idea, there is nothing in the historical and political becoming of any interest to a philosopher. Let everyone bother about his own affairs, and let us stop talking about it. In this case, the rat-man is right, as is, by the way, the case with some ex-communists who are either averse of their rents or who lost courage. However, to hold on to the Idea, to the existence of this hypothesis, does not mean that we should retain its first form of presentation which was centered on property and State. In fact, what is imposed on us as a task, even as a philosophical obligation, is to help a new mode of existence of the hypothesis to deploy itself.

So where do we stand today with regard to communism? The first step is to admit that the solution is not to limit the market and private property by direct interventions of the State and state ownership. The domain of State itself is also in its own way “private”: private in the precise Kantian sense of the “private use of Reason” in State administrative and ideological apparatuses:

The public use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men. The private use of one's reason, on the other hand, may often be very narrowly restricted without particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment. By public use of one's reason I understand the use which a person makes of it as a scholar before the reading public. Private use I call that which one may make of it in a particular civil post or office which is entrusted to him.

What one should add here, moving beyond Kant, is that there is a privileged social group which, on account of its lacking a determinate place in the “private” order of social hierarchy, directly stands for universality: it is only the reference to those Excluded, to those who dwell in the blanks of the State space, that enables true universality. There is nothing more “private” than a State community which perceives the Excluded as a threat and worries how to keep the Excluded at a proper distance. In other words, in the series of the four antagonisms, the one between the Included and the Excluded is the crucial one, the point of reference for the others; without it, all others lose their subversive edge: ecology turns into a “problem of sustainable development,” intellectual property into a “complex legal challenge,” biogenetics into an “ethical” issue. One can sincerely fight for ecology, defend a broader notion of intellectual property, oppose the copyrighting of genes, while not questioning the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded - even more, one can even formulate some of these struggles in the terms of the Included threatened by the polluting Excluded. In this way, we get no true universality, only “private” concerns in the Kantian sense of

the term. Corporations like Whole Foods and Starbucks continue to enjoy favor among liberals even though they both engage in anti-union activities; the trick is that they sell products that contain the claim of being politically progressive acts in and of themselves. One buys coffee made with beans bought at above fair-market value, one drives a hybrid vehicle, one buys from companies that provide good benefits for their customers (according to the corporation's own standards), etc. Political action and consumption become fully merged. In short, without the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded, we may well find ourselves in a world in which Bill Gates is the greatest humanitarian fighting against poverty and diseases, and Rupert Murdoch the greatest environmentalist mobilizing hundreds of millions through his media empire.

When politics is reduced to the "private" domain, it takes the form of the politics of FEAR - fear of losing one's particular identity, of being overwhelmed. Today's predominant mode of politics is post-political bio-politics - an awesome example of theoretical jargon which, however, can easily be unpacked: "post-political" is a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration, while "bio-politics" designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primal goal. It is clear how these two dimensions overlap: once one renounces big ideological causes, what remains is only the efficient administration of life... almost only that. That is to say, with the depoliticized, socially objective, expert administration and coordination of interests as the zero-level of politics, the only way to introduce passion into this field, to actively mobilize people, is through fear, a basic constituent of today's subjectivity.

No wonder, then, that the by far predominant version of ecology is the ecology of fear, fear of a catastrophe - human-made or natural - that may deeply perturb, destroy even, the human civilization, fear that pushes us to plan measures that would protect our safety. This ecology of fear has all the chances of developing into the predominant form of ideology of global capitalism, a new opium for the masses replacing the declining religion: it takes over the old religion's fundamental function, that of putting on an unquestionable authority which can impose limits. The lesson this ecology is constantly hammering is our finitude: we are not Cartesian subjects extracted from reality, we are finite beings embedded in a bio-sphere which vastly transgresses our horizon. In our exploitation of natural resources, we are borrowing from the future, so one should treat our Earth with respect, as something ultimately Sacred, something that should

not be unveiled totally, that should and will forever remain a Mystery, a power we should trust, not dominate. While we cannot gain full mastery over our bio-sphere, it is unfortunately in our power to derail it, to disturb its balance so that it will run amok, swiping us away in the process. This is why, although ecologists are all the time demanding that we change radically our way of life, underlying this demand is its opposite, a deep distrust of change, of development, of progress: every radical change can have the unintended consequence of triggering a catastrophe.

It is this distrust which makes ecology the ideal candidate for hegemonic ideology, since it echoes the anti-totalitarian post-political distrust of large collective acts. This distrust unites religious leaders and environmentalists - for both, there is something of a transgression, of entering a prohibited domain, in this idea of creating a new form of life from scratch, from the zero-point. And this brings us back to the notion of ecology as the new opium for the masses; the underlying message is again a deeply conservative one - any change can only be the change for the worst - here is a nice quote from the TIME magazine on this topic:

Behind much of the resistance to the notion of synthetic life is the intuition that nature (or God) created the best of possible worlds. Charles Darwin believed that the myriad designs of nature's creations are perfectly honed to do whatever they are meant to do - be it animals that see, hear, sing, swim or fly, or plants that feed on the sun's rays, exuding bright floral colours to attract pollinators.

This reference to Darwin is deeply misleading: the ultimate lesson of Darwinism is the exact opposite, namely that nature tinkers and improvises, with great losses and catastrophes accompanying every limited success - is the fact that 90 percent of the human genome is 'junk DNA' with no clear function not the ultimate proof of it? Consequently, the first lesson to be drawn is the one repeatedly made by Stephen Jay Gould: the utter contingency of our existence. There is no Evolution: catastrophes, broken equilibriums, are part of natural history; at numerous points in the past, life could have turned into an entirely different direction. The main source of our energy (oil) is the result of a past catastrophe of unimaginable dimensions. One should thus learn to accept the utter groundlessness of our existence: there is no firm foundation, a place of retreat, on which one can safely count. "Nature doesn't exist": "nature" qua the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its *hubris*, brutally throwing off the rails its circular motion, is man's fantasy; nature is already in itself "second nature," its balance is always secondary, an attempt to negotiate a "habit" that would restore some order after catastrophic interruptions.

With regard to this inherent instability of nature, the most consequent was the proposal of a German ecological scientist back in 1970s: since nature is changing constantly and the conditions on Earth will render the survival of humanity impossible in a couple of centuries, the collective goal of humanity should be not to adapt itself to nature, but to intervene into the Earth ecology even more forcefully with the aim to freeze the Earth's change, so that its ecology will remain basically the same, thus enabling humanity's survival. This extreme proposal renders visible the truth of ecology.

The lesson to be fully endorsed is thus that of another environmental scientist who came to the result that, while one cannot be sure what the ultimate result of humanity's interventions into geo-sphere will be, one thing is sure: if humanity were to stop abruptly its immense industrial activity and let nature on Earth take its balanced course, the result would have been a total breakdown, an imaginable catastrophe. "Nature" on Earth is already to such an extent "adapted" to human interventions, the human "pollutions" are already to such an extent included into the shaky and fragile balance of the "natural" reproduction on Earth, that its cessation would cause a catastrophic imbalance. This is what it means that humanity has nowhere to retreat: not only "there is no big Other" (self-contained symbolic order as the ultimate guarantee of Meaning); there is also no Nature qua balanced order of self-reproduction whose homeostasis is disturbed, thrown off the rails, by the imbalanced human interventions. Indeed, what we need is ecology without nature: the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature is the very notion of nature we rely on.

Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* is a vision of what would have happened if humanity (and ONLY humanity) were suddenly to disappear from the earth - natural diversity blooming again, nature gradually regaining human artefacts. We, humans, are reduced to a pure disembodied gaze observing our own absence. (As Lacan pointed out, this is the fundamental subjective position of fantasy: to be reduced to a, the gaze which observes the world in the condition of the subject's non-existence - like the fantasy of witnessing the act of one's own conception, the parental copulation, or the act of witnessing one's own burial, like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. A jealous child likes to indulge in the fantasy of imagining how his parents would react to his own death, putting at stake his own absence.) "The world without us" is thus fantasy at its purest: witnessing the Earth itself retaining its pre-castrated state of innocence, before we humans spoiled it with our hubris. The irony is that the most prominent example comes from the

catastrophe of Chernobyl: the exuberant nature taking over the disintegrating debris of the nearby city Pripyat which was abandoned, left the way it was.

Against this background, one should also render problematic Badiou's distinction between man *qua* mortal "human animal" and the "inhuman" subject as the agent of a Truth-procedure: man is pursuing happiness and pleasures, worrying about death, etc., it is an animal endowed with higher instruments to reach its goals, while only as a subject faithful to a Truth-Event does it truly raise above animality. The problem with this dualism is that it ignores Freud's basic lesson: there is no "human animal," a human being is from its birth (and even before) torn out of the animal constraints, its instincts are "denaturalized," caught in the circularity of the (death-)drive, functioning "beyond the pleasure principle," marked by the stigma of what Eric Santner called "undeadness" or the excess of life. This is why there is no place for "death drive" in Badiou's edifice, for the "distortion" of human animality which precedes fidelity to an Event. It is not only the "miracle" of a traumatic encounter with an Event which derails a human subject from its animality: its libido is already in itself derailed. One should thus turn around the usual criticism of Badiou: what is problematic is not the quasi-religious miracle of the Event, but the very "natural" order disturbed by the Event.

So, back to the prospect of ecological catastrophe, why do we not act? It is too short to attribute our disbelief in the catastrophe to the impregnation of our mind by scientific ideology, which leads us to dismiss the sane concerns of our common reason, i.e., the gut sense which tells us that something is fundamentally wrong with the scientific-technological attitude. The problem is much deeper, it resides in the unreliability of our common sense itself which, habituated as it is to our ordinary life-world, finds it difficult really to accept that the flow of everyday reality can be perturbed. Our attitude here is that of the fetishist split: "I know very well (that the global warming is a threat to the entire humanity), but nonetheless... (I cannot really believe it). It is enough to look at my environs to which my mind is wired: the green grass and trees, the whistle of the wind, the rising of the sun... can one really imagine that all this will be disturbed? You talk about the ozone hole - but no matter how much I look into the sky, I don't see it - all I see is the same sky, blue or grey!"

And therein resides the horror of the Chernobyl accident: when one visits the site, with the exception of the sarcophagus, things look exactly the same as before, life seems to have deserted the site, leaving

everything the way it is, and nonetheless we are aware that something is terribly wrong. The change is not at the level of the visible reality itself, it is a more fundamental one, it affects the very texture of reality. No wonder there are some lone farmers around the Chernobyl site who continued to lead their lives as before - they simply ignore all the incomprehensible talk about radiations. Do these farmers not behave like the madman in the old joke circulating among Lacanians to exemplify the key role of the Other's knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to the mental institution where the doctors do their best to finally convince him that he is not a grain but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back very trembling of scare - there is a chicken outside the door and that he is afraid that it would eat him. "Dear fellow," says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man". "Of course I know that," replies the patient, "but does the chicken know it?" The chicken from the joke stands for the big Other which doesn't know. In the last years of Tito's life, he was effectively such a chicken: some archives and memoirs show that, already in the mid-1970s, the leading figures around Tito were aware that Yugoslavia's economic situation was catastrophic; however, since Tito was nearing his death, they made a collective decision to postpone the outbreak of a crisis till his death - the price was the fast accumulation of external debt in the last years of Tito's life. When, in 1980, Tito finally dies, the economic crisis did strike with revenge, leading to a 40 per cent fall of standard of living, to ethnic tensions and, finally, civil and ethnic war that destroyed the country - the moment to confront the crisis adequately was missed. One can thus say that what put the last nail in the coffin of Yugoslavia was the very attempt by its leading circle to protect the ignorance of the Leader, to keep his gaze happy.

Is this not what, ultimately, culture is? One of the elementary rules of culture is to know when (and how) to pretend NOT to know (or notice), to go on and act as if something which happened did not happen. When a person near me accidentally produces an unpleasant vulgar noise, the proper thing to do is to ignore it, not to comfort him: "I know it was an accident, don't worry, it doesn't really matter!" We should thus understand in the right way the joke about the chicken: a madman's question is a quite pertinent question in many everyday situations. When parents with a young child have affairs, fight and shout at each other, they as a rule (if they retain a minimum of decency) try to prevent the child to notice it, well aware that the child's knowledge would have had a devastating effect on him - so what they try to maintain is precisely a situation of "We know that we cheat and fight and shout, but the child/chicken doesn't know it." (Of course, in many

cases, the child knows it very well, but merely feigns not to notice anything wrong, aware that in this way his parents' life is a little bit easier.) Or, at a less vulgar level, recall a parent in a difficult predicament (dying of cancer, in financial difficulties), but trying to keep this secret from his nearest and dearest...

And this is also our problem with ecology: we know it, but the chicken doesn't know it... The problem is thus that we can rely neither on scientific mind nor on our common sense - they both mutually reinforce each other's blindness. The scientific mind advocates a cold objective appraisal of dangers and risks involved where no such appraisal is effectively possible, while common sense finds it hard to accept that a catastrophe can really occur. The difficult ethical task is thus to "un-learn" the most basic coordinates of our immersion into our life-world: what usually served as the recourse to Wisdom (the basic trust in the background-coordinates of our world) is now THE source of danger.

One can learn even more from the Rumsfeldian theory of knowledge - the expression, of course, refers to the well-known accident in March 2003, when Donald Rumsfeld engaged in a little bit of amateur philosophizing about the relationship between the known and the unknown: "There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know." What he forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the "unknown knowns," things we don't know that we know - which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the "knowledge which doesn't know itself," as Lacan used to say. If Rumsfeld thinks that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq are the "unknown unknowns," the threats from Saddam about which we do not even suspect what they may be, what we should reply is that the main dangers are, on the contrary, the "unknown knowns," the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves. In the case of ecology, these disavowed beliefs and suppositions are the ones which prevent us from really believing in the possibility of the catastrophe, and they combine with the "unknown unknowns." The situation is like that of the blind spot in our visual field: we do not see the gap, the picture appears continuous.

If the Freudian name for the "unknown known" is the Unconscious, the Freudian name for the "unknown unknowns" is TRAUMA, the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, something the subject cannot integrate in any way. In her *Les nouveaux blessés* (*The New Wounded*), Catherine Malabou proposed a critical reformulation of

psychoanalysis along these lines. Her starting point is the delicate echoing between internal and external Real in psychoanalysis: for Freud and Lacan, external shocks, brutal unexpected encounters or intrusions, due their properly traumatic impact to the way they touch a pre-existing traumatic “psychic reality.” Malabou rereads along these lines Lacan’s reading of the Freudian dream of “Father, can’t you see I’m burning?” The contingent external encounter of the real (the candle collapses and inflames the cloth covering the dead child, and the smell of the smoke disturbs the father on a night-watch) triggers the true Real, the unbearable fantasy-apparition of the dead child reproaching his father. In this way, for Freud (and Lacan), every external trauma is “sublated,” internalized, owing its impact to the way a pre-existing Real of the “psychic reality” is aroused through it. Even the most violent intrusions of the external real - say, the shocking effect on the victims of bomb-explosions in war - owe their traumatic effect to the resonance they find in perverse masochism, in death-drive, in unconscious guilt-feeling, etc. Today, however, our socio-political reality itself imposes multiple versions of external intrusions, traumas, which are just that, meaningless brutal interruptions that destroy the symbolic texture of subject’s identity. First, there is the brutal external physical violence: terror attacks like 9/11, the US “shock and awe” bombing of Iraq, street violence, rapes, etc., but also natural catastrophes, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc.; then, there is the “irrational” (meaningless) destruction of the material base of our inner reality (brain-tumors, Alzheimer’s disease, organic cerebral lesions, etc., which can utterly change, destroy even, the victim’s personality; finally, there are the destructive effects of socio-symbolic violence (social exclusion, etc.). (Note how this triad echoes the triad of commons: the commons of external nature, of inner nature, of symbolic substance.) Basically, Malabou’s reproach is that Freud himself succumbs here to the temptation of meaning: he is not ready to accept the direct destructive efficiency of external shocks - they destroy the psyche of the victim (or, at least, wound it in an unredeemable way) without resonating in any inner traumatic truth. It would be obviously obscene to link, say, the psychic devastation of a “Muslim” in a Nazi camp to his masochism, death-drive, or guilt feeling: a Muslim (or a victim of multiple rape, of brutal torture...) is not devastated by unconscious anxieties, but directly by a “meaningless” external shock which can in no way be hermeneutically appropriated/integrated.

For Freud, if external violence gets too strong, we simply exit the psychic domain proper: the choice is “either the shock is re-integrated into a pre-existing libidinal frame, or it destroys psyche and nothing is left.” What he cannot envisage is that the victim as if were survives its own death: all different forms of

traumatic encounters, independently of their specific nature (social, natural, biological, symbol...) lead to the same result - a new subject emerges which survives its own death, the death (erasure) of its symbolic identity. There is no continuity between this new “post-traumatic” subject (suffering Alzheimer’s or other cerebral lesions, etc.): after the shock, literally a new subject emerges. Its features are well-known from numerous descriptions: lack of emotional engagement, profound indifference and detachment - it is a subject who is no longer “in-the-world” in the Heideggerian sense of engaged embodied existence. This subject lives death as a form of life - his life is death-drive embodied, a life deprived of erotic engagement; and this holds for henchmen no less than for his victims. If the XXth century was the Freudian century, the century of libido, so that even the worst nightmares were read as (sado-masochist) vicissitudes of the libido, will the XXIst century be the century of such post-traumatic disengaged subjects whose first emblematic figure, that of the Muslim in concentration camps, is not multiplying in the guise of refugees, terror victims, survivors of natural catastrophes, of family violence...? The feature that runs through all these figures is that the cause of the catastrophe remains libidinally meaningless, resisting any interpretation.

The constellation is properly frustrating: although we (individual or collective agents) know that it all depends on us, we cannot ever predict the consequences of our acts - we are not impotent, but, quite on the contrary, omnipotent, without being able to determine the scope of our powers. The gap between causes and effects is irreducible, and there is no “big Other” to guarantee the harmony between the levels, to guarantee that the overall outcome of our interactions will be satisfactory. The problem is that, although our (sometimes even individual) acts can have catastrophic (ecological, etc.) consequences, the big Other prevents us from believing in it, from assuming this knowledge and responsibility: “Contrary to what the promoters of the principle of precaution think, the cause of our non-action is not the scientific uncertainty. We know it, but we cannot make ourselves believe in what we know.” This situation confronts us with the deadlock of the contemporary “society of choice” at its most radical. In the standard situation of the forced choice (a situation in which I am free to choose on condition that I make the right choice, so that the only thing left for me to do is the empty gesture of pretending to accomplish freely what is in any case imposed on me). Here, on the contrary, the choice really is free and is, for this very reason, experienced as even more frustrating: we find ourselves constantly in the position of having to decide about matters that will fundamentally affect our lives, but without a proper foundation in knowledge - as John Gray put it:

we have been thrown into a time in which everything is provisional. New technologies alter our lives daily. The traditions of the past cannot be retrieved. At the same time we have little idea of what the future will bring. We are forced to live as if we were free.

It is thus not enough to vary the standard motif of the Marxist critique: “although we allegedly live in a society of choices, the choices effectively left to us are trivial, and their proliferation masks the absence of true choices, choices that would affect the basic features of our lives...” While this is true, the problem is rather that we are forced to choose without having at our disposal the knowledge that would enable a qualified choice.

The lesson is thus the old Lacanian one: there is no big Other. The first to get it was Job - after Job is hit by calamities, his theological friends come, offering interpretations which render these calamities meaningful, and the greatness of Job is not so much to protest his innocence as to insist on the meaninglessness of his calamities (when God appears afterwards, he gives right to Job against the theological defenders of faith). The function of the three theological friends is to obfuscate the impact of the trauma with a symbolic semblance.

This need to discover a meaning is crucial when we are confronting potential or actual catastrophes, from AIDS and ecological disasters to holocaust: they have no “deeper meaning.” The legacy of Job prohibits us such a gesture of taking a refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us as meaningless catastrophe, the God who sees the entire picture in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony. When confronted with an event like the holocaust or the death of millions in Congo in the last years, is it not obscene to claim that these stains have a deeper meaning in that they contribute to the harmony of the Whole? Is there a Whole which can teleologically justify an event like the holocaust? Christ’s death on the cross thus means that one should drop without restraint the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology - Christ’s death on the cross is the death of this God, it repeats Job’s stance, it refuses any “deeper meaning” that obfuscates the brutal real of historical catastrophes.

And the lesson of ecology is that we should go to the end here and accept the non-existence of the ultimate big Other, nature itself with its pattern of regular rhythms, the ultimate reference of order and stability.

However, this lack of the big Other does not entail that we are irrevocably caught in the misery of our finitude, deprived of any redemptive moments. In his *The Cattle Truck*, Jorge Semprun reports how he witnessed the arrival of a truckload of Polish Jews at Buchenwald; they were stacked into the freight train almost 200 to a car, traveling for days without food and water in the coldest winter of the war. On arrival all in the carriage had frozen to death except for 15 children, kept warm by the others in the centre of the bundle of bodies. When the children were emptied from the car the Nazis let their dogs loose on them. Soon only two fleeing children were left:

The little one began to fall behind, the SS were howling behind them and then the dogs began to howl too, the smell of blood was driving them mad, and then the bigger of the two children slowed his pace to take the hand of the smaller... together they covered a few more yards... till the blows of the clubs felled them and, together they dropped, their faces to the ground, their hands clasped for all eternity.

One can easily imagine how this scene should be filmed: while the soundtrack renders what goes on in reality (the two children are clubbed to death), the image of their hands clasped freezes, immobilized for eternity - while the sound renders temporary reality, the image renders the eternal Real. It is the pure surface of such fixed images of eternity, not any deeper Meaning, which allows for redemptive moments in the bleak story of the Shoah. One should read this imagined scene together with the final shot of *Thelma and Louise*: the frozen image of the car with the two women “flying” above the precipice: is this the positive utopia (triumph of the feminine subjectivity over death), or the masking of the miserable wreck the car IS in reality at that time? The weakness of the final shot from *Thelma and Louise* is that the frozen image is not accompanied by the soundtrack depicting what “really” went on (the car crash, terrible cries of the dying women) - strangely, this lack of reality undermines the very utopian dimension of the frozen image. In contrast to this scene, our imagined filmed scene from Semprun would fully assert the Platonic duality of temporal empirical reality and eternal Idea.

What this means is that, without shame, in conceiving art, we should return to Plato. Plato's reputation suffers because of his claim that poets should be thrown out of the city - a rather sensible advice, judging from my post-Yugoslav experience, where ethnic cleansing was prepared by poets' dangerous dreams (the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic being only one among them). If the West has the industrial-military complex, we in the ex-Yugoslavia had a poetic-military complex: the post-Yugoslav war was triggered by the explosive mixture of the poetic and the military component. So, from a Platonic

standpoint, what does a poem about the holocaust do? It provides its “description without place”: in renders the Idea of holocaust.

Recall the old Catholic strategy to guard men against the temptation of the flesh: when you see in front of you a voluptuous feminine body, imagine how it will look in a couple of decades - the dried skin, sagging breasts... (Or, even better, imagine what lurks now already beneath the skin: raw flesh and bones, inner fluids, half-digested food and excrements...) Far from enacting a return to the Real destined to break the imaginary spell of the body, such a procedure equals the escape from the Real, the Real which announces itself in the seductive appearance of the naked body. That is to say, in the opposition between the spectral appearance of the sexualized body and the repulsive body in decay, it is the spectral appearance with is the Real, and the decaying body which is reality - we take recourse to the decaying body in order to avoid the deadly fascination of the Real which threatens to draw us into its vortex of *jouissance*.

See also: [*Ecology without Nature*](#) .